

Defeater Beliefs #4–6: Relativism, Emotionalism, Personal History

I. Defeater Belief #4: Relativism

- Relativism (in particular, “moral relativism”; a.k.a., “postmodernism,” “pluralism”) is the idea that “man is the measure of things.” There is no objective right and wrong that applies to everybody in every culture. Rather, each person has their own truth that works for them.
- How will you encounter this? People will say things like:
 - “I’m glad Christianity works so well for you. But it’s not for me.”
 - Translation: each person needs to find their own authentic spirituality that “works.” It can’t be dictated from anyone else.
 - “What, does Christianity have a monopoly on the truth?”
 - Translation: the claim to know the one way of salvation sounds hopelessly arrogant. Don’t be so narrow-minded.
 - “Don’t try to force your religion down me. Everyone has to find their own way.”
 - Translation: evangelism is not ok. “Proselytism” (trying to convince someone of your beliefs in the hopes of converting them) is a dirty word.
 - Books/movies like the *Life of Pi* are a great example of this view, touting the idea that you could practice Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism simultaneously. In other words, all these worldviews can coexist side-by-side, even in one person!
- Key words for relativists:
 - “Authentic”: every person needs to be true to themselves, to find their authentic spirituality. No one can dictate this for you.
 - “Tolerance”: calling another worldview “wrong” is a form of abuse.
 - Sayers: “In the world it is called Tolerance, but in hell it is called Despair … the sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die.”
(quoted in Carson, *The Gagging of God*, p. 53).
- Where does this idea come from?
 - Relativism is a reaction to modernism, with its high view of human reason. Modernism was drunk with the idea that human reason (or “science”), liberated from the constraints of religion, could give us access to “things as they are” and become the deliverer of humankind.
 - Several things killed this hope:
 - The 20th century’s horrors proved this hope to be empty.
 - Immanuel Kant (way back in the 18th c.!) argued that humans do not discover “what is objectively out there in the world”, but instead we project onto the world the ideas of our own minds: “The intellect does not derive its laws (a priori) from nature but prescribes them to nature.” Eventually mainstream philosophy caught up with him.
 - The recognition that everyone has a limited, culturally bound vantage point killed the idea of an objective observer. Now that seems hopelessly naïve.

- How do we address this?
 - A few arguments from reason:
 - Tolerance is tolerant of everything except “intolerance”. In other words, pluralists are closet totalitarians and are inconsistent with themselves. Witness the ousting of Christian student groups from college campuses in the name of “tolerance.”
 - Is there a world “out there” that we all inhabit together? If so, it does not make sense that people can have mutually exclusive takes on this world. Need to redefine “truth” as “what corresponds to reality” not “what works for me.”
 - Acknowledging that we all have our own limited perspectives does not necessarily mean that there is no objectivity. If, for example, there is a God who sees and knows all, and who communicates himself to us in terms we can understand, then his knowledge would be the ultimate test of our subjective understandings.
 - Keller: “show people that all their doubts about Christianity are really alternate faith-assertions.” Then “ask them for as much warrant and support for their assertions as they are asking for yours.”
 - Addressing the heart:
 - Our culture is burnt out from the heavy-handed Christian monoculture of the 1700-1800’s (e.g., Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*). For most people, saying “there’s one way” means: “let’s go back to hypocritical suppression of minorities”—unthinkable.
 - Knowing some things with certainty does not mean: fundamentalist certainty about everything. There is a place for diversity of opinion in the Christian worldview!
 - 2 Cor 6:2: now is the time of God’s grace, where God bids all people to repentance. “Forcing people” to believe is not what we are about.
 - Common grace means that sometimes non-Christians understand things better than Christians. Christians can insist on salvation through Christ alone while at the same time being open to learning from unbelievers.
 - Evangelism doesn’t have to come from pride. It can (and should) come from love: if I believe you are on the verge of perishing in your sin, I will call you to repent and be saved because I love you!
 - Shift the focus from abstract talk about “relativism” to concrete talk about Jesus.

II. Defeater Belief #5: Emotionalism

- This defeater boils down to a feeling: “Christianity doesn’t *feel* right.”
- The feeling can have lots of sources, but usually it has to do with the non-trendy beliefs that we hold:
 - God is holy and judges the wicked.
 - God foreordained all that has come to pass, including who will choose him.
 - Certain kinds of sexual behavior is wrong and therefore Christians are bigots.

- Christians (some of us) believe that it is right to distinguish between male and female in different gender roles (in marriage, in the church), and therefore we are sexist.
- In short, Christians are decidedly not “cool”. We’re so 18th-century.
- What lies behind this? A number of things:
 - A postmodern distrust of reason has led to a refusal to reason. Appeals to “logic” sound so stuffy. “Hey, this is my intimate relationship with God, not a math class.”
 - People want to be authentic, true to themselves. Just like their pursuit of a spouse, they’re looking for a religion that “feels right,” that fits them like a glove.
- Responses:
 - Can you reason with someone who doesn’t believe in reason?
 - As Christians we do believe there are limits to our reason (“Mystery is the lifeblood of dogmatics”; Bavinck). But we also believe that our reason is a gift from God that he wants us to use. Encourage them to think!
 - A lot of the kneejerk responses they have are based on misconceptions.
 - Put them directly in contact with Jesus through the Scriptures. Love them sacrificially. Tell them stories about God’s work (biblical and from church history).

III. Defeater Belief #6: Personal History

- This defeater is a catchall for people who have had a bad experience with Christianity:
 - They grew up in the faith but were turned off by legalism, by a corrupt church leader or member, etc.
 - They explored Christianity at one point and got hung up somewhere, so they are not interested in reopening the matter.
 - Their view of Christians is tainted by extremist wings of the church, by moral compromises among church leaders, or by the portrayal of Christians in the media.
 - They have Christian friends or family who harass them and are not winsome witnesses.
- Responses:
 - We need to call sin “sin,” and not excuse the wrongs done by Christians.
 - Christianity is first of all about Christ and his perfection. The Bible even says that Christians will struggle with sin, and that there will be false Christians! (1 John 1:8–9; 2:19; Tit 3:10; 2 Tim 4:10)
 - The Jesus whom they are rejecting very often is not the true Jesus of the Bible, but a mistaken caricature.
 - Love them! Respect them! Become part of a new, positive personal history with Christianity.